

HP PHONE HOME

Dear Linux Magazine Reader,

As you will see if you read our news, Hewlett Packard, which everyone calls HP, was big this month. The computer giant announced some sweeping changes, including sweeping changes to undo the sweeping changes they announced a few months ago. Sweeping changes are always part of the scene in an economic downturn, but I can't help thinking it is better to figure out what you want to do and sweep in one direction, rather than trying to sweep several ways at once.

As a cultural icon, HP predates the personal computer era. When I was a teenager, no one had a smartphone, but all the geeky kids had calculators, and HP calculators were the coolest and geekiest calculators of all. With their elegant design and distinctive reverse polish notation, they washed coolness back onto the owner. At once simple, yet inscrutable to the uninitiated, they were the iPhone of their era.

But that was many years ago. HP's mystique didn't make the transition into the computer era. Their printers had a solid reputation for a while, but HP was one of many computer vendors to wake up one day and discover that the PC hardware market just doesn't lend itself to mystical brand names. In today's world, people buy PCs the way they buy cans of corn and beans at the grocery – a vague memory of a logo lingers until around dinnertime, but no one has any real expectation that one particular logo leads to a significantly different experience.

That's why I was interested in HP's announcement last February that it was working toward including its webOS mobile operating system in its new generation of personal computers. What a game changer. Of course, I'm partial to Linux, but to be honest, Android is looking (and acting) less like Linux every day. From a standpoint of the PC chess game, it was intriguing to see if HP could build up a highly distinctive and recognizable hardware/software combo platform that could compete with Apple/iOS, then actually extend that platform from the smartphone space back into the PC/tablet realm.

It is hard to believe HP would cash out this strategy after only six months and one failed TouchPad line. In fact, now it looks like they might be leaving the personal electronics business completely. Of course, they've had some big transitions, with a CEO leaving unexpectedly and another one arriving. Could it be because their new leader, Leo Apotheker, is consolidating his authority and turning the company toward the kind of behind-the-scenes business integration and support he used to preside over at SAP? Perhaps, or maybe, despite my best efforts to extract secret meaning in their moves, the real problem is just a bad

economy. Still, I can't help thinking these grandiose, drastic actions hither and thither, aiming for seemingly arbitrary and discontinuous targets, is an indication of the brash, "take charge" mentality we have come to value in business, in which upheaval is regarded as equivalent to innovation.

When the board of directors says, "What? Your TouchPad didn't make money? What are you going to do about it?" it is increasingly difficult for the CEO to say, "Not much. I'll just make some minor corrections and we'll keep doing what we've been doing."

The Wall Street-style model of uber-compensated, itinerant CEOs doesn't lend itself to the kind of single-minded determination it takes to navigate through hard times and stay on course into uncharted business conditions.

Up in Redmond, Microsoft's founder sits in the chairman's office. In Mountain View, a Google founder calls the shots, and over in Cupertino, until a few weeks ago, Apple's iconic creator remained at the reins. It is worth noting that, during HP's heyday as the maker of the coolest, most mystical calculators in the dorm, Bill Hewlett was still at the helm.

I bet they wish they could call him back.

Joe

Joe Casad,
Editor in Chief

